words

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words

by Slice_of_Apple

Summary

Eren has trouble using words to express his feelings.

“You and you,” barks out Levi, pointing at Jean and Eren.

“Dammit,” Jean swears under his breath. Lately, Eren’s behavior has become even more volatile than usual. He is prickly and angry, especially around Jean. They have had more fights in the past month, it seems, than in the 6 months prior to that. Anything Jean does seems to set him off. Saying hello. Not saying hello. Talking too loud at meals. Talking too softly at meals. Washing the dishes too slowly. Washing the dishes too quickly. But the worst, the absolute worst, is engaging in any kind of training together. Jean has had to step up his game tenfold merely to avoid getting battered to pieces. It is almost worse than partnering with Annie or Mikasa, because Eren is such a loose cannon, and he doesn’t seem to mind how many bruises Jean ends up with. Jean is never hurt too badly, but enough to be unhappily sore and very irritated.

Jean’s current strategy is to do everything in his power to avoid Eren. Unfortunately, it looks like that won’t be possible today. Sometimes Jean thinks that the Captain is far more perceptive than he lets on, and he is in fact purposefully, rather than accidentally, making Jean’s life more miserable.

The goal of this simulation exercise is to retrieve the other team’s “prize” (a carefully guarded empty box) and also to land a “killing blow” on each of the opposing team members (snatch off the sash loosely tied to their gear). It makes a nice break from practicing against the fake titans. It also forces the squad members to test their agility against opponents with better fine motor dexterity than the real titans. Usually, he likes this activity. It involves ODM gear, and therefore Jean holds something of an advantage over most of the other squad members.

Being partnered with Eren, though – Jean can’t see the afternoon ending in anything but disaster. It’s just a question of how many new bruises he’ll have at dinner tonight. Ah, well. He’ll have to make the best of it, like so many other aspects of being a Scout. The sooner they get started, the sooner it will end. Bertholdt and Reiner have already disappeared among the trees.

“Come on,” Jean says gruffly to a tense and scowling Eren. As he starts to walk to their end of the training area, he hears the angry stomp of Eren’s feet behind him.

“Do you want to be offense or defense?” he calls over his shoulder.

Eren grunts unintelligibly in response.

“What?” Jean asks.

Another grunt.

“Are you even human?” Jean can’t help adding. As soon as the words are out of his mouth, he regrets them. As expected, a sharp blow to his back (sharp enough to cause the first bruise, he’s sure), quickly follows.

"Don't *hit* me, asshole!" he says through gritted teeth.

Rather legitimizing Jean's question about his humanity, Eren makes a guttural noise (is it a growl? a snarl?) in response. Jean hastily shoots his hooks up into the trees. They have a mission, and he's not going to let Eren's prehistoric behavior drag him down into the primordial ooze.

"I'm on offense," he calls down. At least that will keep him out of range of Eren for the time being, and he'll be able to focus on what he's actually supposed to be doing.

Reiner and Bertholdt make a particularly troublesome enemy pair. They come from the same hometown, and they seem to have an almost wordless empathy, easily reading each other's moves and moods. It will be difficult to beat them.

Jean has stealthily made his way to within view of the "prize" box, which is being held strategically on a large branch with nothing around it; Reiner and Bertholdt will be able to easily spot anyone's approach. Bertholdt sits calmly in front of it, like a giant, gawky bird of prey. Jean doesn't see Reiner.

Jean has tried various strategies in the past for this exercise, but the one he's settled on for today involves creating a series of diversions. It's an expected tactic, and not likely to fully work, but hopefully will allow Jean to distract Bertholdt long enough to give him a fighting chance at grabbing the prize. It may also help flush out a potentially hidden Reiner.

He throws the first rock, causing a few of the smaller branches on the opposite site of Bertholdt to flutter invitingly. Bertholdt's attention immediately focuses on the noise, allowing Jean to move in closer. He keeps throwing rocks, trailing them closer and closer to Bertholdt, as he himself moves in, until he is almost directly above the box. By now, Bertholdt has inched his way forwards, towards the rustling branches.

Jean has run out of rocks, and he's worried Bertholdt will notice him, so he decides not to wait any longer. He swoops down, his hand outstretched for the box.

Reiner tackles him from above. *Shit*.

Reiner's hands are clasped around Jean's waist, effectively immobilizing him. His thick arms are like tree trunks, and no matter how Jean struggles, he can't twist away.

A moment later and Reiner lets go. Jean is sure Reiner has grabbed his sash, therefore "killing" him. But when he looks down, he realizes it's something worse. Reiner has unbuckled his gear! Damn! That's not part of the exercise, although it's been done before. Jean is in for some humiliation, as now he'll have to be carried down from the tree.

It takes a moment for Jean to process that Reiner is holding Jean's gear at arm's length out from the branch, and then – *dropping it.*

"Reiner? What the hell! That's my gear! If you've trashed it, so help me – " He breaks off as Reiner turns towards him. He is pale and sweaty, staring at Jean with a strange, blank expression on his face. He steps forward and Jean scrambles backwards. There's something frightening about his empty face, devoid of human emotion – almost as though Reiner is a machine and not a person.

And then Reiner leans forward and …. pushes Jean.

"Reiner! No!" cries Bertholdt in horror, startled into nearly falling off his perch.

Jean swings his arms in a wild arc, teetering on the edge for an endless second, and then he's falling backwards, into thin air. He's used to moving at high speeds through the air, and he's had a few close shaves before, so he doesn't completely lose his head. Instead, he shifts his body so that he at least is facing down, at the same time stretching his hands as far as he can. If only he can grab on to a branch, try to at least partially break his fall. But there don't seem to be any that he can reach.

Jean is resigning himself to serious injury, possibly death (as much as one can resign oneself while hurtling downwards at an unearthly speed) when something slams into him with all the force of a runaway cart. Before he knows what's happening, he's swinging back up through the air, an arm clamped around his middle.

It's Eren! Eren's arm is holding him. It's Eren who is panting with the effort of keeping Jean aloft. The side of his head is pressed so tightly into Eren's chest, he thinks he can even hear Eren's heartbeat. Jean doesn't like the dizzying sensation of being carried, of not having any control over the trajectory. But it's better than the alternative – that is, a deadly fall from a great height.

Eren lands on another tree, a good distance from Reiner. Even once they are on the branch, his arm stays looped around Jean's chest, so Jean is forced into an awkward half-kneel next to him.

"Let me go, you fucker!" he gasps, dazed from the recent events but nonetheless wanting to *get away*.

"What the hell happened?" asks Eren roughly as he releases Jean. Jean crawls rapidly away from him, not worrying about how foolish he must look. He peers around, but there is no one coming – no Reiner bearing down on them with that frighteningly vacant face. Only then does he take in Eren's question.

"He pushed me off," says Jean wonderingly. Then, his anger growing, "He unbuckled my gear, *dropped it,* and then he pushed me off!"

Jean can see the shock on Eren's face, followed swiftly by anger. But, for once, he is not the target.

“I’m taking you back,” is all Eren says.

“Don’t be stupid. We can still try to get the prize.”

“No,” says Eren, in a voice that Jean knows all too well – a voice that holds all the rigidity of a Wall.

Jean gives in. He doesn’t like it, submitting to Eren without a fight, but he knows Eren won’t concede, not when he sounds like that. He also sees Eren’s point. Things have gotten out of hand, and safety is the priority right now. They have no idea where Bertholdt and Reiner are, and they are seriously handicapped by Jean’s lack of gear.

By the time they make their way back, they find out that Reiner has been bundled off to the infirmary. Apparently, he’s ill, feverish, and out of his head. Which explains what happened – he was probably hallucinating when he pushed Jean off.

The whole incident has left Jean more shaken than he would like to admit, and all he wants is for the day to be over. He has to force himself to walk back into the woods for his gear.

As he stands over the bent wreckage, he can’t help feeling defeated. There will be hell to pay for this disaster, even though in no way could it possibly be considered Jean’s fault.

The warped ODM gear can no longer be buckled on and makes for a heavy, awkward bundle as he carries it back. Eren is waiting for him at the start point, his face thunderous.

Good grief, thinks Jean. Will this day never end?

“Back the fuck off. I’m not in the mood for your bullshit.” Jean is too exhausted to mince his words.

Eren doesn’t say anything but grabs half of the gear out of his hands. Jean doesn’t have the energy to stop him. Also, although he would never tell Eren, he’s grateful for the help. As they walk back together, Jean can feel the rage coursing off Eren in waves

“What's your problem, man?” he asks. He says it more out of habit than anything else, and he’s surprised when Eren answers it.

“You!” Eren says. “You’re my problem!”

“How am I your problem?” Jean says with exasperation. “I’ve done everything I can to stay out of your way.”

“That’s the fucking problem.”

Jean turns to look at him, surprised. What the hell does *that* mean? His eyes narrow.

Eren doesn’t look well. His steps are dragging, and dark circles ring his eyes. Maybe that’s why he isn’t making any sense. Maybe he has the same illness Reiner does.

It’s all too much for Jean to try to sort through. They’re back at base, anyway. He wrenches the gear out of Eren’s hands, and says,“Thanks for carrying that. Oh, and, um, thanks for, um, catching me.” He *is* grateful for his life, after all.

He has finally – finally – sorted out the gear, accepted the tongue lashing from the gear supply sergeant, and is running to the dining hall in the hopes of scraping together some sort of meal, when something catches his eye. He slows down and looks more carefully in the dim light.

Two heads, leaning in together. It’s – it’s Eren, with Armin next to him. Eren is hunched over, a miserable cast to his posture. Armin is right up against him, an arm around Eren’s shoulder in a gesture of comforting intimacy.

Jean can’t help feeling a pang. Eren has Armin and Mikasa firmly in his corner, he’s always had them. Jean doesn’t have anyone, now that Marco is gone. Well, to some extent he’s got the 104th. Even though some of them have peeled off after graduation, he feels certain that they all have each other’s backs. Surviving that kind of training forges deep bonds, and he’s grateful for that. But he hasn’t connected with anyone the way those three are connected. The thought makes him feel sad, and, he realizes with embarrassment, more than a little jealous.

He finds himself slowing down and then stopping just past the two heads, out of sight but within earshot.

“Eren – “

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not the one you should be apologizing to.”

“I know,” says Eren, his voice uncharacteristically subdued. “I – I just… don’t know what to do.”

Armin’s voice becomes gentle. “You could express your feelings.”

Jean's ears prick up. Is that what Eren's bad mood has been about? Is Eren pining away for someone? It's an appealing thought. First of all, because it's always nice to think of Eren suffering. And second of all, because hopefully he'll man up, ask whoever it is out, and stop harassing Jean. After all, Eren is reasonably attractive (despite his absolutely terrible personality), and in all likelihood if he expressed interest, the recipient would respond favorably. Jean wonders idly who it is. Christa, maybe? This train of thought is interrupted by Eren speaking again.

"Ugh," he says, and Jean can hear the grimace in his voice. Then, unfortunately, Eren lowers his voice to a frustratingly inaudible level. Jean cranes his neck but can only hear bits and pieces of what Eren says next.

Mutter, mutter, "doesn't get it" mutter, mutter, "doesn't feel the same way" mutter, mutter.

"How can you possibly know that, Eren?"

Mutter, mutter "smug," mutter, "infuriating" mutter mutter, "big baby."

"To be honest, you're the one who's acting like a baby," Armin says matter-of-factly. "Or a very angry toddler, to be more precise."

Jean's eyes widen. He agrees one hundred percent, he is just a little surprised that Armin feels the same way. Apparently, Jean isn't the only one who is sick of Eren's temper tantrums.

Jean wonders again who the object of Eren's affection is. He decides that is must be Christa. Jean's seen the way he looks at her, like she's the second coming. Although, he would never really call her behavior babyish. Maybe Connie? Or Sasha, always stealing food? He hasn't gotten that kind of vibe when Eren is around either of them, but who the hell knows how Eren acts around someone he's interested in? Probably hit them over the head so much as look at them. At the thought, a vague uneasiness filters though the back of his mind, but he shrugs it off. It doesn't matter who it is, just as long as Eren works it out of his system before Jean is beaten to a pulp.

"Would you hurry up with the washing?" Eren says sharply.

"If I don't wash them right the first time, I'll just have to do it all again later!" Jean retorts. They are, unfortunately, on kitchen cleanup together.

"It doesn't have to take a year to wash each dish," grumbles Eren.

That does it. Jean has had *enough*. He's putting a stop to this right now. For good.

“Use your words, Jaeger, and freaking tell her! Tell her how you feel and get off my back already!” Jean is sure that it’s Christa. She’s the only one Eren spends any amount of time with, apart from Mikasa and Armin, and he knows it’s neither of them.

Eren stares at Jean like he’s stark, raving mad, then whips the cloth he’s using to dry the dishes out so it snaps painfully against Jean’s arm.

Jean says, icily, “Exactly what I’m talking about. Your *words*, Jaeger. Remember? Words? Formed from the vocal apparatus? Your mouth? Lips? Tongue? Voice box? Lungs? All working together in a coordinated series of movements that results in speech?”

Eren stares at him dumbly. He is, apparently, and not for the first time, unable to put the described apparatus to work.

“Language, Jaeger. Got it? One of the main things that separates us from animals? From dumb beasts?” *Or not.* The unspoken insult hangs so heavily in the air that Jean can tell that even Eren hears it. His face steadily darkens, until it is a deep, flaming red – the color of impending doom, Jean knows all too well.

Oh Christ, not again! Jean is so sick of this whole show.

“For fuck’s sake, just ask Christa out! I’m sure she’ll say yes! Here. I’ll do it for you.” He grabs Eren’s arm and drags him outside.

Luckily, they find Christa conveniently sitting behind the women’s quarters with Ymir.

“Will you go out with Jaeger?” Jean asks Christa abruptly.

Eren splutters at his side, but Jean ignores him.

Ymir cackles loudly.

Christa stares up at them, her mouth open in a wide “o”.

“Will you go on a date with Jaeger?” he asks again, louder.

Then Jean notices Ymir’s arm. It is around Christa’s shoulders. Her hand is flat across Christa’s chest. Her fingers are stroking (one might even call it fondling if one were so inclined) Christa’s…

Jean’s eyebrows shoot up. He can feel the blush spread across his face, move down his neck; all of a sudden, his whole body is uncomfortably hot.

“Goodbye,” he mutters in a low voice as he swings around.

He is already back in the kitchen when he realizes that he is still gripping Eren’s arm. He releases it at once and drops his face into his hands.

“Excellent use of your words, Kirstein,” croaks out a laughing Eren, whose tongue seems to have been considerably loosened by the incident. Jean doesn’t blame him for laughing. He is hugely embarrassed. He had no idea that Ymir and Christa were together. The image of Ymir’s hand stroking Christa's breast won’t leave his head. His face must be as red as a tomato.

He can’t believe he’s been so oblivious, that he was so far off base as far as Christa (and Ymir, don’t forget Ymir!) are concerned. He wonders what else he’s gotten so very, very wrong.

He doesn’t have long to wonder.

Eren pulls Jean’s hands away from his face with surprising gentleness.

“What?” Jean asks angrily, although he knows the mocking is about to begin.

“I’m taking your advice,” says Eren.

“What?” repeats Jean, confused now.

“I’m using my mouth,” said Eren.

Eren grabs Jean by the face and pulls him in.

Turns out it’s a day full of surprises.

Because Eren is kissing Jean. He’s kissing Jean quite hard, in fact, their lips bumping, their teeth clashing painfully. Eren is also squeezing his face much too tightly.

The whole thing is awkward and uncomfortable and shocking and also… nice. Eren’s firm body against his is… nice. Eren’s breath on his face is… nice. The taste of Eren’s lips is… nice. It all feels … nice.

No. More than nice. It feels amazing. And too amazing for Jean to stop. That must be why he’s grabbed Eren and is tugging him closer. That must be why he’s making those greedy, little noises, spurring Eren on. That must be why he’s kissing Eren as hard as Eren is kissing him.

It’s only with the greatest effort that he pulls back in order to pant out, “I said use your *words*, Jaeger.”

“I distinctly heard you say ‘mouth’. And ‘lips’. And-”

Jean opens his own mouth to interrupt, and Eren presses their lips together again, this time slipping his tongue in.

Not unexpected, perhaps, but Jean has to admire the timing.

“You were saying?” murmurs Eren, after a long, wet, blissful moment.

“Shut up,” Jean gasps hoarsely. “Fucking hell, Eren. Is this why you've been such a complete ass?"

Eren grins up at him. “Guilty as charged,” he says unrepentantly.

“You stupid idiot,” Jean adds. “Why didn’t you just tell me?” He swoops in for another kiss, stopping briefly along the way to nibble at Eren’s ear. He is finding Eren to be more delectable with each passing second.

Eren, apparently finding Jean to be similarly tasty, breaks off in order to gently bite his way along Jean’s jaw. “You’re the idiot,” he says, and Jean can hear the smile in his voice. “I *did* tell you.”

“Really?” asks Jean drily. “With your words? Or your fists?

One evening some time later, Jean finishes kitchen cleanup with Annie earlier than expected. He hunts around mopily for a time before finding Eren, who is busy cleaning his boots.

Eren is bent over the task, whistling tunelessly as he scrubs away at the muck embedded in the rich leather.

Jean is about to call out, then stops himself. He approaches Eren silently from behind. When he is close enough, he reaches out with a careful finger and brushes it against Eren’s hair. He’s always amazed at how soft it is under his touch. Perhaps because it’s such an odd, new thing, to think about anything soft in relation to Eren.

Eren turns around, frowning, a hand lifted to bat away whatever is touching him. When he sees that it’s Jean, however, the hand drops. He smiles and his whole face lights up. Jean’s breath catches in his throat. It’s the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen, that smile. It’s the kind of smile that could catapult someone (that someone being Jean, of course) into the stratosphere. He still can’t believe that it’s meant for him, that smile. He still can’t believe those eyes, Eren’s eyes, can look at him with such open affection. He smiles back, a little uncertainly.

Eren drops the boot and scrambles around. He lifts himself up so he can wind his arms around Jean’s neck and brush a kiss against Jean’s wobbly smile. Jean wraps his own arms around Eren’s waist, pulling him in even more tightly. There’s an uncomfortable pricking sensation behind his eyes.

Eren seems to catch on to some of what is rumbling through Jean’s mind, because he buries his face in Jean’s shoulder and whispers, quietly, for Jean’s ears alone, “I love you,

horseface."

"I love you, too, suicidal bastard," Jean whispers back.

They've both gotten better at using their words.

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